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BERGSON'S INTELLECT AND MATTER.

MUCH of the lucidity of Bergson's writing depends upon drawing nice contrasts and dualisms, from which the discussion proceeds until later complications arise, when the originally sharply defined positions are modified and toned down, and, when thus restated, drawn into some sort of unity. The argument, however, has owed its clearness and force throughout to the validity of the very dualisms that are later declared only provisional. Invariably the discussion starts by inserting a deep cleft into the subject, antitheses are thrown out, hard and fast distinctions made,—all is clear. Later, however, when the question of synthesis comes up it, quietly, and without apology, dulls the edge of these distinctions and shades one into the other. But such modification of the original assumptions often affects the validity of the whole argument, and the softening down process is many times far from being the harmless thing it is assumed to be. In some cases it should mean the revision of all that preceded. Dewey has pointed out how this procedure vitiates Bergson's doctrine of perception. It is, however, the logical weakness in his treatment of most of his problems. How often in the early portion of his discussions we meet the phrase "it is not a difference of degree but of kind," and then later discover that the difference is after all not of kind but of degree.

Thus the necessity for a dualism in epistemology is proved¹ by showing that only by thus splitting itself up could consciousness follow the "double form of the real." The cleft in knowledge is radical just because there is a radical split in reality. The thoroughgoingness of his metaphysical dualism is the ground for his sharp distinction between the forms of knowledge. It is because inert matter is radically different from life or consciousness that the intellect is radically different from instinct. All depends upon the validity of the presupposition. Hence when

¹ *Creative Evolution*, p. 178.

later matter and consciousness turn out to differ only in degree the basis for the twofold form of knowledge would seem to disappear. The point of departure is thus shown to be provisional, but the argument drawn from it is left standing as final.

This shifting from what is only subsequently revealed as a provisional antithesis to a deeper viewpoint nowhere shows itself more plainly, it seems to me, than in Bergson's treatment of the relation of the intellect to matter. That which qualifies the intellect for matter is the very thing that disqualifies it for life. "Intelligence is in tune with matter, and that is why the physics and metaphysics of inert matter are so near each other."¹ And, again, "the intellect bears within itself, in the form of natural logic, a latent geometrism that is set free in the measure and proportion that the intellect penetrates into the inner nature of inert matter."² It is said to be "charged with matter as instinct is with life."³ If we would avoid confusion we must "begin by distinguishing between the inert and the living, the one adapted in advance to the frame in which we insert it, the other incapable of being held in the frame otherwise than by a convention which eliminates from it all that is essential."⁴ Because of the deep cleft in the real, philosophy must not, it is said, "leave biological and psychological facts to positive science alone, as it has left, and rightly left, physical facts."⁵

Philosophy is, therefore, related to the two sets of sciences in a very different way. To the physical sciences it is genially related. Here it has but to guard against an over-precision to which science in its mathematical form aspires. Whereas in the biological sciences it must insist that such knowledge has only symbolic verity. "On this ground philosophy ought to follow science in order to impose upon scientific truth a knowledge of another kind."⁶

"The understanding is thus at home in the domain of unorganized matter." "Intellectuality and materiality have been constituted, in detail, by reciprocal adaptations."⁷ The under-

¹ *Creative Evolution*, p. 195.

² P. 195.

³ P. 178.

⁴ P. 197.

⁵ P. 196.

⁶ P. 199.

⁷ P. 187.

standing and matter are drawn together in the proportion that the latter is removed from life. Hence the dual form of knowledge is, now, the ground for a metaphysical dualism.

If, therefore, the intellect, as already quoted, is moulded upon the configuration of matter, and is at home with the unorganized solid, we are justified in assuming that here is laid down, approximately at least, the nature and constitution of matter. If it is so utterly incapable of understanding life and so much at home with matter, the ultimate nature of the latter must be radically different from the former.

Now that which prevents the intellect from seizing the principle of life and consciousness is the interpenetrating character of their phenomena. They fuse and flow together in such a way as to exclude analysis, or the separation of part from part. That which interpenetrates defies the understanding. To proceed here with analysis is but to treat the living as if it were dead. "Concepts" we are told¹ "are outside each other like objects in space." Of the discontinuous alone does the intellect form a clear idea. Continuity, change, movement escape it. It is shut in with a real that is doomed to discontinuity and immobility. Knowledge is thus narrowly and sharply defined and likewise is its object. Matter being its object must be held tightly within the lines prescribed, for it is by virtue of its contrast with life that the nature and function of the intellect are proved to be essentially unlike those of instinct. Its configurations, which are said to be the forms over which thought is moulded, must not be permitted to melt away. This mutual adaptation depends upon holding firmly to the restrictions marked out by our original definitions. If matter should show signs of denying its assumed materiality, or the understanding reveal any disposition to break its shell, the apparent clearness of the whole procedure would seem to be endangered. A leak would be sprung in the antithesis, and soon the entire survey might be washed away.

Now, as long as, or whenever, Bergson is interested in proving the understanding's inability to grasp life, he throws it matter. It is then said to be "at home in the domain of matter." And, as

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 160.

this contention is generally the dominant one, it is generally left free in its own domain. It is as if by widening the gap between matter and life the intellect would be drawn away from the problem of freedom. Thus the dualistic aspect of the real is stressed when the emphasis is upon epistemology. It is then that mind and matter are opposed most antithetically. The former is interpreted in terms of duration, the latter is assimilated to space. It may be, at another time, we shall see that each of the two forms of the real has, in fact, a little of the very quality that is now used as their differentia. It would then be a difference of degree, whereas it is now said to be a difference of kind.

Now, does not the relation of the intellect to matter vary as the latter is taken from the provisional or deeper view? As rigorously defined, the intellect can be said to be "at home with matter" only when matter is construed in terms that contrast it with life. And what becomes of that affinity when the hidden and unexpressed idealism finds its way to the surface,—as it always does when the exigencies require it? Is there not some difficulty in holding to both ends of the discussion? If the deeper insight that reveals matter as a form of consciousness whose discontinuity is largely only apparent is brought to the foreground, and steadily held, the respective objects of the two forms of knowledge will so resemble each other as to very largely remove the grounds for assuming that they can be grasped only by totally dissimilar functions. Instinct and thought might then be permitted, as far as the demands of their objects are concerned, to reflect a similar fusion.

When, however, from the side of consciousness, its dualism is emphasized, then the more superficial view of matter, its discontinuity and externality, is thrown into relief. It is with this aspect of matter that the narrow and formal logic of the understanding is so much at home, the concepts of the one fitting into the space of the other. But, of course, in being thus cut for the forms of the understanding, violence is done to its deeper meaning. And it can hardly be said, to quote again, "that the intellect bears within itself in the form of natural logic, a latent geometrism that is set free in the measure that it penetrates into the

inner nature of inert matter." Neither the logic of the understanding nor geometry penetrates very far into the heart of matter. There may be more danger in leaving biological facts to positive science than there is in leaving physical facts, but the latter can not be said "to be rightly left there,"—not if the interest is metaphysical. And if it is not, why the danger to biological facts? If the interest is merely practical, then science is justified in applying a common method to both classes of facts; if the interest is more than practical, then the results of both sets of science are made relative, there being merely a difference of degree of relativity.

Whenever matter is forced into an extreme opposition to consciousness, into its direct antithesis, the intellect becomes most objective and follows it most closely. Here it transcends its merely practical character, and it is here that it is most metaphysical. Physics and metaphysics thus tend to converge as matter is drawn out in the direction of space. When, however, the antithesis is slackened, and matter reveals its kinship to mind, that is, when the deeper unity begins to protrude itself, the intellect becomes relative, pragmatic, and ceases to possess metaphysical value. We then see that what is left of matter in the stiff and formal categories of the understanding is but a static and specialized impression that has been secured for the needs of action. Its extra-spatial qualities, those that relate it, when the occasion arises, to mind are not among those that the intellect retains.

It is true that the understanding is more disconcerted in the presence of life than in the case of matter, but the difficulties with the former do not differ in kind from those of the latter. Withdraw the assumption that matter is, in fact, discontinuous, withdraw the assumption that it is without memory and freedom, and they are finally withdrawn, as at the close of *Matter and Memory*, p. 296, "thus, between brute matter and the mind most capable of reflexions there are all possible intensities of memory or what comes to the same thing, all degrees of freedom," and no distinction, in principle, can any longer be said to divide the data of the sciences. Thus, in respect to epistemology, as far as

principle is concerned, their validity is of the same order. That is, the cleft upon which the contrary assumption was based has turned out to be, as originally put, largely arbitrary.

But this is not to unite nature in the factitious and superficial manner of the understanding, construing all in terms of mechanism; it is to affirm a vital unity, and thus deny that mechanism can be taken as final anywhere. And this is in accord with Bergson's own deeper metaphysical view. If made explicit, however, it makes much of the epistemology appear insecure and artificial. Matter conceals in its depths the same problems that are made obvious in the case of life. Metaphysically, thought has the same right to one domain as to the other. I may be reminded here that Bergson would admit as much, but that its sanction is never more than practical. And surely we are told often enough that the rôle of knowledge is not speculative. But here, again, his thought is ambiguous, now leaning in this direction, now in that. Knowledge always bears the stamp of utility, but sometimes this is taken to mean that it is relative as opposed to metaphysical; on the other hand it is asserted to be not relative but approximative. In the latter sense it is objective and therefore, of course, metaphysical. "From this point of view the knowledge of matter that our perception on the one hand and science on the other give to us appear, no doubt, as approximative but not as relative."¹ "In principle positive science bears on reality itself, provided it does not overstep the limit of its own domain which is inert matter."² In the one case being practical would mean that knowledge was distorted, *i. e.*, corrupted, in the other, it would imply only an undue constriction, a narrowing of the point of view.

The correction of the defects of knowledge, however, from these two constructions would be radically different. One would require the abandonment of knowledge, the turning to an altogether different function, that of intuition; the other a widening and deepening of knowledge itself. Bergson's intuitionism is based upon the first supposition, but he often suggests the second mode of

¹ *Creative Evolution*, p. 206.

² P. 207.

correction, indeed, he not only suggests it but applies it in much of his discussion of matter as shown in the above quotations. "Physics . . . touches the absolute" by transcending, or to the degree that it passes beyond the point of view from which its data appear discontinuous. In its ultimate view of matter it corrects its earlier assumptions that were too narrowly determined by practical motives. As the needs of action recede thought corrects its data and goes in the direction of continuity. Physics attains a view of matter that is no mere refinement of the process of cutting out objects in space.

Thus, within science itself, there is a movement of thought that breaks through the limitations of the understanding and achieves a more synthetic view. With so much admitted one is at a loss to know why the trail is abandoned for some altogether different procedure, why if science can so correct the externalism and artificiality with which it began it is not allowed to further develop its implications. If it can, thus, in its own name deny the constructions of the understanding it is on the road to a goal which has been assumed to be accessible only to intuition.

Something of the immediacy of intuition would, therefore, come into thought as the grasp of the latter is made more synthetic. These two functions would no longer appear as essentially distinct or opposed. The distinction might then be contrued as an historical one, as a difference of stage within the thought process. At the terminus of every such process there is something of the presence of intuition. When mediation is over, consciousness gathers itself into a form of appreciation that is direct and intuitional. The final attestation always comes in the form of an immediacy.

Since, therefore, they are not separable but aspects of a common process, together they may reflect, and follow the unity of the real, as the sharp dualism of mind and matter tends to disappear. Thus, our epistemology would be based, not upon the provisional, but upon the final metaphysical view. Consciousness would possess a continuity not unlike that revealed in nature, and when matter begins to show its kinship to spirit, thought would be prepared to follow.

And, let us grant that the necessities of action largely pre-occupy the intellect, that it interprets its object with respect to such ends. Grant this, is the remedy to be found in a flight to some kind of knowledge that claims a disinterested idea of its data—whatever such an idea might mean? The cure of a too immediately practical view is not in an impractical one, but in a view that is the expression of a deeper and wider interest. As it thus enlarged its ends, thought would attain greater objectivity without losing its functional value.

The very faults which Bergson so repeatedly brings against the understanding, its tendency to fixation and division, its consequent abstractness, seem to me to be the inherent weakness in his form of exposition and his treatment of problems. He abundantly illustrates the dangers of analysis. In order to achieve clearness he has a habit of pushing distinctions to the point where they become abstractions, and his later efforts to atone for such violence are seldom satisfactory; in so far as they are, the novelty of his thought is generally greatly reduced. And, despite his statement that philosophy should give us back an integrated experience, his interest is generally in the direction of division and analysis. The work of integration, of knitting together the various threads of his thought, is seldom done with equal care. This may, of course, be done more consciously in a later work, but I fancy such a work will consist more in the way of modification than in the development of what is now before us. Intuition will probably lean more heavily upon thought, after thought has been duly chastened, and matter will be allowed to lean more in the direction of mind.

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